Russian Short Stories

Tempting Providence

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Tempting Providence by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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You're always saying "accident, accident. …" That's just the point. What I want to say is that on every merest accident it is possible to look more deeply.

Permit me to remark that I am already sixty years old. And this is just the age when, after all the noisy passions of his youth, a man must choose one of three ways of life: moneymaking, ambition, or philosophy. For my part I think there are only two paths. Ambition must, sooner or later, take the form of getting something for oneself—money or power—in acquiring and extending either earthly or heavenly possibilities.

I don't dare to call myself a philosopher, that's too high-flown a title for me … it doesn't go with my character. I'm the sort of person who might anytime be called upon to show his credentials. But all the same, my life has been extremely broad and very varied. I have seen riches and poverty and sickness, war and the loss of friends, prison, love, ruin, faith, unbelief. And I've even—believe it or not, as you please—I've even seen *people*. Perhaps you think that a foolish remark? But it's not. For one man to see another and understand him, he must first

of all forget his own personality, forget to consider what impression he himself is making on his neighbours and what a fine figure he cuts in the world. There are very few who can see other people, I assure you.

Well, here I am, a sinful man, and in my declining years I love to ponder upon life. I am old, and solitary as well, and you can't think how long the nights are to us old folk. My heart and my memory have preserved for me thousands of living recollections—of myself and of others. But it's one thing to chew the cud of recollection as a cow chews nettles, and quite another to consider things with wisdom and judgment. And that's what I call philosophy.

We've been talking of accident and fate. I quite agree with you that the happenings of life seem senseless, capricious, blind, aimless, simply foolish. But over them all—that is, over millions of happenings interwoven together, there reigns—I am perfectly certain of this—an inexorable law. Everything passes and returns again, is born again out of a little thing, out of nothing, burns and tortures itself, rejoices, reaches a height and falls, and then returns again and again, as if twining itself about the spiral curve of the flight of time. And this spiral having been accomplished, it in its turn winds back again for many years, returning and passing over its former place, and then making a new curve—a spiral of spirals.... And so on without end.

Of course you'll say that if this law is really in existence people would long ago have discovered it and would be able to define its course and make a kind of map of it. No, I don't think so.

We are like weavers, sitting close up to an infinitely long and infinitely broad web. There are certain colours before our eyes, flowers, blues, purples, greens, all moving, moving and passing … but because we're so near to it we can't make out the pattern. Only those who are able to stand above life, higher than we do, gentle scholars, prophets, dreamers, saints and poets, these may have occasional glimpses through the confusion of life, and their keen inspired gaze may see the beginnings of a harmonious design, and may divine its end.

You think I express myself extravagantly? Don't you now? But wait a little; perhaps I can put it more clearly. You musn't let me bore you, though. … Yet what can one do on a railway journey except talk?

I agree that there are laws of Nature governing alike in their wisdom the courses of the stars and the digestion of beetles. I believe in such laws and I revere them. But there is *Something* or *Somebody* stronger than Fate, greater than the world. If it is *Something*, I should call it the law of logical absurdity, or of absurd logicality, just as you please. … I can't express myself very well. If it is *Somebody*, then it must be someone in comparison with whom our biblical devil and our romantic Satan are but puny jesters and harmless rogues.

Imagine to yourself an almost godlike Power over this world, having a desperate childish love of playing tricks, knowing neither good nor evil, but always mercilessly hard, sagacious, and, devil take it all, somehow strangely just. You don't understand, perhaps? Then let me illustrate my meaning by examples.

Take Napoleon: a marvellous life, an almost impossibly great personality, inexhaustible power, and look at his end—on a tiny island, suffering from disease of the bladder, complaining of the doctors, of his food, senile grumblings in solitude. … Of course, this pitiful end was simply a mocking laugh, a derisive smile on the face of my mysterious *Somebody*. But consider this tragic biography thoughtfully, putting aside all the explanations of learned people—they would explain it all simply in accordance with law—and I don't know how it will appear to you, but here I see clearly existing together this mixture of absurdity and logicality, and I cannot possibly explain it to myself.

Then General Skobelef. A great, a splendid figure. Desperate courage, and a kind of exaggerated belief in his own destiny. He always mocked at death, went into a murderous fire of the enemy with bravado, and courted endless risks in a kind of unappeasable thirst for danger. And see—he died on a common bed, in a hired room in the company of prostitutes. Again I say: absurd, cruel, yet somehow logical. It is as if each of these pitiful deaths by their contrast with the life, rounded off, blended, completed, two splendid beings.

The ancients knew and feared this mysterious *Someone*—you remember the ring of Polycrates—but they mistook his jest for the envy of Fate.

I assure you—i.e., I don't assure *you*, but I am deeply assured of it myself—that sometime or other, perhaps after thirty thousand years, life on this earth will have become marvellously beautiful. There will be palaces, gardens,

fountains.… The burdens now borne by mankind—slavery, private ownership of property, lies, and oppression—will cease. There will be no more sickness, disorder, death; no more envy, no vice, no near or far, all will have become brothers, And then *He*—you notice that even in speaking I pronounce the name with a capital letter—He, passing one day through the universe, will look on us, frown evilly, smile, and then breathe upon the world—and the good old Earth will cease to be. A sad end for this beautiful planet, eh? But just think to what a terrible bloody orgiastic end universal virtue might lead, if once people succeeded in getting thoroughly surfeited by it!

However, what's the use of taking such great examples as our earth, Napoleon, and the ancient Greeks? I myself have, from time to time, caught a glimpse of this strange and inscrutable law in the most ordinary occurrences. If you like, I'll tell you a simple incident when I myself clearly felt the mocking breath of this god.

I was travelling by train from Tomsk to Petersburg in an ordinary first-class compartment. One of my companions on the journey was a young civil engineer, a very short, stout, good-natured young man: a simple Russian face, round, well-cared for, white eyebrows and eyelashes, sparse hair brushed up from his forehead, showing the red skin beneath… a kind, good "Yorkshireman." His eyes were like the dull blue eyes of a sucking pig.

He proved a very pleasant companion. I have rarely seen anyone with such engaging manners. He at once gave me his lower sleeping-place, helped me to place my trunk on the rack,

and was generally so kind that he even made me feel a little awkward. When we stopped at a station he bought wine and food, and had evidently great pleasure in persuading the company to share them with him.

I saw at once that he was bubbling over with some great inward happiness, and that he was desirous of seeing all around him as happy as he was.

And this proved to be the case. In ten minutes he had already began to open his heart to me. Certainly I noticed that directly he spoke of himself the other people in the carriage seemed to wriggle in their seats and take an exaggerated interest in observing the passing landscape. Later on, I realised that each of them had heard the story at least a dozen times before. And now my turn had come.

The engineer had come from the Far East, where he had been living for five years, and consequently he had not seen his family in Petersburg for five years. He had thought to dispatch his business in a year at the most, but at first official duties had kept him, then certain profitable enterprises had turned up, and after it had seemed impossible to leave a business which had become so very large and remunerative. Now everything had been wound up and he was returning home. Who could blame him for his talkativeness; to have lived for five years far from a beloved home, and come back young, healthy, successful, with a heart full of unspent love! What man could have imposed silence upon himself, or overcome that fearful itch of impatience, increasing with every hour, with every passing hundred versts?

I soon learnt from him all about his family. His wife's name was Susannah or Sannochka, and his daughter bore the outlandish name of Yurochka. He had left her a little three-year-old girl, and "Just imagine!" cried he, "now she must be quite grown up, almost ready to be married."

He told me his wife's maiden name, and of the poverty they had experienced together in their early married days, when he had been a student in his last year, and had not even a second pair of trousers to wear, and what a splendid companion, nurse, mother, and sister in one, his wife had been to him then.

He struck his breast with his clenched fist, his face reddened with pride, and his eyes flashed, as he cried:

"If only you knew her! A be-eauty! If you're in Petersburg I must introduce you to her. You must certainly come and see us there, you must, indeed, without any ceremony or excuse, Kirochnaya 156. I'll introduce you to her, and you'll see my old woman for yourself. A Queen! She was always the belle at our civil-engineers' balls. You must come and see us, I swear, or I shall be offended."

And he gave us each one of his visiting cards on which he had pencilled out his Manchurian address, and written in the Petersburg one, telling us at the same time that his sumptuous flat had been taken by his wife only a year ago—he had insisted on it when his business had reached its height.

Yes, his talk was like a waterfall. Four times a day, when we stopped at important stations, he would send home a reply-paid telegram to be delivered to him at the next big stopping-

place or simply on the train, addressed to such and such a number, first-class passenger. So-and-so.… And you ought to have seen him when the conductor came along shouting in a singsong tone “Telegram for first-class passenger So-and-so.” I assure you there was a shining halo round his head like that of the holy saints. He tipped the conductors royally, and not the conductors only either. He had an insatiable desire to give to everybody, to make people happy, to caress them. He gave us all souvenirs, knicknacks made out of Siberian and Ural stones, trinkets, studs, pins, Chinese rings, jade images, and other trifles. Among them were many things that were very valuable, some on account of their cost, others for their rare and artistic work, yet, do you know, it was impossible to refuse them, though one felt embarrassed and awkward in receiving such valuable gifts—he begged us to accept them with such earnestness and insistence, just as one cannot continue to refuse a child who continues to ask one to take a sweet.

He had with him in his boxes and in his hand luggage a whole store of things, all gifts for Sannochka and Yurochka. Wonderful things they were—priceless Chinese dresses, ivory, gold, miniatures in sardonyx, furs, painted fans, lacquered boxes, albums—and you ought to have seen and heard the tenderness and the rapture with which he spoke of his new ones, when he showed us these gifts. His love may have been somewhat blind, too noisy, and egotistical, perhaps even a little hysterical, but I swear that through these formal and trivial veilings I could see a great and genuine love—love at a sharp and painful tension.

I remember, too, how at one of the stations when another wagon was being attached to the train, a pointsman had his foot cut off. There was great excitement, all the passengers went to look at the injured man—and people travelling by train are the most empty-headed, the wildest, the most cruel in the world. The engineer did not stay in the crowd, he went quietly up to the stationmaster, talked with him for a few moments, and then handed him a note for a sum of money—not a small amount, I expect, for the official cap was lifted in acknowledgment with the greatest respect. He did this very quickly; no one but myself saw his action, but I have eyes that notice such things. And I saw also that he took advantage of the longer stoppage of the train and succeeded in sending off a telegram.

I can see him now as he walked across the platform—his white engineer's cap pushed to the back of his head; his long blouse of fine tussore, with collar fastening at the side; over one shoulder the strap of his field-glasses, and crossing it, over the other shoulder, the strap of his dispatch-case—coming out of the telegraph office and looking so fresh and plump and strong with such a clear complexion, and the look of a well-fed, simple, country lad.

And at almost every big station he received a telegram. He quite spoilt the conductors—running himself to the office to inquire if there was no message for him. Poor boy! He could not keep his joy to himself, but read his telegrams aloud to us, as if we had nothing else to think about except his family happiness—"Hope you are well. We send kisses and await your

arrival impatiently.—Sannochka, Yurochka." Or: "With watch in hand we follow on the timetable the course of your train from station to station. Our spirits and thoughts are with you." All the telegrams were of this kind. There was even one like this: "Put your watch to Petersburg time, and exactly at eleven o'clock look at the star Alpha in the Great Bear. I will do the same."

There was one passenger on the train who was owner or bookkeeper, or manager of a gold mine, a Siberian, with a face like that of Moses the Moor, dry and elongated, thick, black, stern brows, and a long, full, greyish beard—a man who looked as if he were exceptionally experienced in all the trials of life. He made a warning remark to the engineer:

"You know, young man, it's no use you abusing the telegraph service in such a way."

"What do you mean? How is it no use?"

"Well, it's impossible for a woman to keep herself all the time in such an exalted and wound-up state of mind. You ought to have mercy on other peoples' nerves."

But the engineer only laughed and clapped the wiseacre on the knee.

"Ah, little father, I know you, you people of the Old Testament. You're always stealing back home unexpectedly and on the quiet. 'Is everything as it should be on the domestic hearth?' Eh?"

But the man with the icon face only raised his eyebrows and smiled.

“Well, what of it? Sometimes there’s no harm in that.”

At Nizhni we had new fellow-travellers, and at Moscow new ones again. The agitation of my engineer was still increasing. What could be done with him? He made acquaintance with everybody; talked to married folks of the sacredness of home, reproached bachelors for the slovenliness and disorder of bachelor life, talked to young ladies about a single and eternal love, conversed with mothers about their children, and always led the conversation to talk about his Sannochka and Yurochka. Even now I remember that his daughter used to lisp: “I have thome yellow thlipperth,” and the like. And once, when she was pulling the cat’s tail, and the cat mewed, her mother said, “Don’t do that, Yurochka, you’re hurting the cat,” and the child answered, “No, mother, it liketh it.”

It was all very tender, very touching, but, I’m bound to confess, a little tiresome.

Next morning we were nearing Petersburg. It was a dull, wet, unpleasant day. There was not exactly a fog, but a kind of dirty cloudiness enveloped the rusty, thin-looking pines, and the wet hills looked like hairy warts extending on both sides of the line. I got up early and went along to the lavatory to wash; on the way I ran into the engineer, he was standing by the window and looking alternately at his watch and then out of the window.

“Good morning,” said I. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, good morning,” said he. “I’m just testing the speed of the train; it’s going about sixty versts an hour.”

“You test it by your watch?”

“Yes, it’s very simple. You see, there are twenty-five *sazhens* between the posts—a twentieth part of a verst. Therefore, if we travel these twenty-five *sazhens* in four seconds, it means we are going forty-five versts an hour; if in three seconds, we’re going sixty versts an hour; if in two seconds, ninety. But you can reckon the speed without a watch if you know how to count the seconds—you must count as quickly as possible, but quite distinctly, one, two, three, four, five, six—one, two, three, four, five, six—that’s a *speciality* of the Austrian General Staff.”

He talked on, with fidgety movements and restless eyes, and I knew quite well, of course, that all this talk about the counting of the Austrian General Staff was all beside the point, just a simple diversion of his to cheat his impatience.

It became dreadful to watch him after we had passed the station of Luban. He looked to me paler and thinner, and, in a way, older. He even stopped talking. He pretended to read a newspaper, but it was evident that it was a tiresome and distasteful occupation for him; sometimes he even held the paper upside down. He would sit still for about five minutes, then go to the window, sit down for a while and seem as if he were trying to push the train forward, then go again to the window and test the speed of the train, again turning his head, first to the right and then to the left. I know—who doesn’t know?—that days and weeks of expectation are as nothing in comparison with those last half-hours, with the last quarter of an hour.

But at last the signal-box, the endless network of crossing rails,

and then the long wooden platform edged with a row of porters in white aprons. … The engineer put on his coat, took his bag in his hand, and went along the corridor to the door of the train. I was looking out of the window to hail a porter as soon as the train stopped. I could see the engineer very well, he had got outside the door on to the step. He noticed me, nodded, and smiled, but it struck me, even at that distance, how pale he was.

A tall lady in a sort of silvery bodice and a large velvet hat and blue veil went past our carriage. A little girl in a short frock, with long, white-gaitered legs, was with her. They were both looking for someone, and anxiously scanning every window. But they passed him over. I heard the engineer cry out in a strange, choking, trembling voice:

“Sannochka!”

I think they both turned round. And then, suddenly a sharp and dreadful wail. … I shall never forget it. A cry of perplexity, terror, pain, lamentation, like nothing else I’ve ever heard.

The next second I saw the engineer’s head, without a cap, somewhere between the lower part of the train and the platform. I couldn’t see his face, only his bright upstanding hair and the pinky flesh beneath, but only for a moment, it flashed past me and was gone. …

Afterwards they questioned me as a witness. I remember how I tried to calm the wife, but what could one say in such a case? I saw him, too—a distorted red lump of flesh. He was dead when they got him out from under the train. I heard afterwards that

his leg had been severed first, and as he was trying instinctively to save himself, he fell under the train, and his whole body was crushed under the wheels.

But now I'm coming to the most dreadful point of my story. In those terrible, never-to-be-forgotten moments I had a strange consciousness which would not leave me. "It's a stupid death," I thought, "absurd, cruel, unjust," but why, from the very first moment that I heard his cry, why did it seem clear to me that the thing must happen, and that it was somehow natural and logical? Why was it? Can you explain it? Was it not that I felt here the careless indifferent smile of my devil?

His widow—I visited her afterwards, and she asked me many questions about him—said that they both had tempted Fate by their impatient love, in their certainty of meeting, in their sureness of the morrow. Perhaps so.... I can't say.... In the East, that tried well of ancient wisdom, a man never says that he intends to do something either today or tomorrow without adding *Insh-Allah*, which means, "In the name of God," or "If God will."

And yet I don't think that there was here a tempting of Fate, it seemed to me just the absurd logic of a mysterious god. Greater joy than their mutual expectation, when, in spite of distance, their souls met together—greater joy, perhaps, these two would never have experienced! God knows what might have awaited them later! Dischantment? Weariness? Boredom? Perhaps hate?